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11 February 1966

MEMORANDUM:

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TO :

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SUBJECT : Address by Dr. Henry Kissinger

1. Dr. Kissinger, whose address to the mid-career course I heard this afternoon, was in his usual brilliant and witty form, tossing off pearls of wisdom in an epigrammatic style which is difficult to recapture. The following, however, may give some impression of the main points in his lecture which he entitled "Contemporary Strategic Doctrine."

2. Despite the title, Kissinger said he would be dealing more with the interplay between foreign policy and strategy than with doctrine itself, and the first thing to note is how radically the "essential condition" of the US has changed in the past twenty years. Before World War II the US was basically immune from attack and its policies could be essentially defensive in character. In particular the US could be sure that before its own national interests were engaged by an aggression, some other country would already have had to commit itself to resist. Now, however, this responsibility has fallen overwhelmingly on the US; we must conduct a precautionary rather than a purely defensive policy, and we ourselves have to make our own judgments as to the ultimate intentions of our adversaries.

3. The US has had to make this major adjustment at a time when there have also been critical changes in the conduct of war. Until the end of World War II, the problem of defense was always one of assembling sufficient power. Now the problem is how to discipline unlimited power to the achievement of national objectives. The weapons at hand are mostly novel and untried--there is no real operational experience--and ranges are unprecedented, resulting in serious problems within alliances. In fact, much of the current dispute within NATO is a disagreement over what the theater of operations will be. Behond this the difference between strategy and tactics has been lost, and all military establishments are now in a high state of readiness. Mobilization or demobilization can no longer be taken as an indication of a country's intentions.

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4. In consequence of all of this, deterrence has become the center of military policy, but deterrence itself is a peculiar thing. It depends essentially on negative elements, and its effectiveness can be measured only by the results produced. Much of it is psychological--a serious threat not taken seriously leads to disaster, while a bluff works if it is taken seriously. Moreover, if a deterrent is effective it creates its own problems. The pacifists will then argue that the threat no longer exists--as is the case in Western Europe today as a result of the effectiveness of NATO.

5. Any major country must also take into account the gaps that now exist in the decision-making process. The decision-maker who frequently must act quickly simply cannot absorb all the material that his researchers may be able to produce. This tends to put the emphasis on "prethink." But this has its hazards, too, since an elaborate plan designed to take into account every contingency may in the end become an excuse for inaction, or may fail to take into account the psychology of those who have to put it into effect. He cited as an example the elaborate plans the Germans had for winning World War I--concentrating their land power in the northern plains, permitting the French to invade southern Germany, and absorbing a Russian attack until the French could be defeated by encirclement and a strike at Paris. However, when the French and Russians did in fact do what the GermansGeneral Staff expected, the German military commanders could not stand it and began a fatal shifting of their forces.

6. Dr. Kissinger then outlined the kind of strategic doctrine which the US has at various times "accepted" since World War II--initially, the attempt simply to use nuclear weapons in a pre-nuclear way (e.g., in the event of a surprise attack the US would seize bases abroad for counter bombardment and eventual invasion of the aggressor); the doctrine of massive retaliation which grew out of the Korean War; the theory of limited war--i.e., an aggressor's resort to attacks which would not warrant massive retaliation; and finally, the idea of the flexible response developed in the late 50s in the context of the growing concern over the possible weakness of the US' second strike capability. Subsidiary to this doctrine were the pressures for a build-up of conventional forces (based in part on the belief that Soviet conventional power had been exaggerated), increasing skepticism regarding tactical nuclear weapons which would be difficult to control

centrally, and the growing conviction that the existence of independent strategic forces other than our own was a menace --since such forces might preclude Presidential control of a graduated response.

7. These shifts in US strategic thinking have clearly caused both military and political problems in the conduct of US policy. Militarily, for example, if nuclear war is safer does it become more likely? How do you conduct a limited nuclear war directed primarily at military targets when technical advances make those targets increasingly mobile? Will both sides follow the game, or will not the weaker side feel impelled to concentrate his more limited force on civilian targets which would more quickly bring the enemy to the negotiating table? Will decision makers in fact be able to carry out a policy of careful, gradual, and delicate escalation, or will they respond the way the German commanders did in World War I? Politically, these strategic shifts have been equally troublesome. The mere fact of the shifts is disquieting to our Allies who have found that at the point when they have understood where we stood and have become committed to it the US has moved in another direction. What is attractive to us may in fact be disturbing to others--careful, discriminating responses look like uncertainty to our European allies. Finally, when we insist on having options, this creates pressures among our allies to become involved in selecting from among these options. If we want military flexibility, then we must accept a certain amount of political rigidity--i.e., we must share the control.

8. Dr. Kissinger turned at the end of his speech to some remarks about Vietnam which did not seem entirely related to the burden of his message but which did spark several questions later on. In response to one of these he said that those who favored our commitment there felt obliged to be optimistic while those who opposed it felt equally obliged to be pessimistic. He happened to favor the commitment, but was under no obligation to see the outcome in any very rosy light. He observed that the US was fighting a military war while the Vietcong was waging a political and psychological war, and some of the communiques which had been issued gave one the impression one was watching a bullfight, with the bull giving out the bulletins. One way to end the war quickly would be to convince the Communists that the US was on the verge of complete madness, but he did not favor a quick end in which the victory would be lost

subsequently because the US has no established, political base in Vietnam. He did not believe in gradual escalation in the north, he thought the US forces should be used differently in the South, and he could see nothing ahead but a long struggle. So far as the risk allegedly involved in the over-commitment of US forces to Vietnam was concerned, he saw no reason why such forces could not be withdrawn in the event of general war, and he thought that to the extent a tense situation made the Communists more careful, the Vietnam crisis might in fact reduce the chances of a larger war. The only other question which produced an interesting response was on NATO. Dr. Kissinger made it clear he still considered the Alliance in need of drastic restructuring, with the Europeans assuming responsibilities we should well be relieved of.